

Balancing on the edges of language

What's the mark of true fluency in a foreign language? Speaking fast, without pauses? A wide vocabulary? Controlling complex grammatical constructions? All very important, of course – but for me, the ultimate test is whether users dare to tamper with the rules of the language, to treat it as the tool it is, to make it genuinely their own.

Breaking the rules of language is something we all readily associate with literature. So when Dylan Thomas writes *a grief ago*, using an abstract noun where we'd expect a noun of time, the unexpected sequence of words makes us sense a nuance of meaning that the word does not have in isolation. *All the moon long*, writes Thomas, in another poem, and again, a new utterance is born. Such creation doesn't come easily. 'Every English poet', said Robert Graves, 'should master the rules of grammar before he attempts to bend or break them'.

But it's not just poets who carry out linguistic manipulation. Theologians do the same thing, as they strive to express in human language their perception of something which transcends humanity. In the past 30 years, the main trend in the language of theology has been to find new ways of bending language to say illuminating things about God – at one extreme, resulting in a radically new language of prayer, as in this verse from 'Litany for the Ghetto':

O God, whose name is spick*,
black-nigger*, bastard, guinea* and
kike*,

Help us to know you...

There's even a new branch of linguistics devoted to it – 'theolinguistics', it's called. And a book by an American theologian, Paul van Buren, is called *The Edges of Language* (SCM, 1972).

Daily breaking

Poets? Theologians? Hardly the stuff of everyday. But in fact, as we walk down a street, or watch television, the bending and breaking of linguistic rules is all around us. Advertising is the most noticeable field.

Children of today play hard – and they have to eat hard, too...

Kellogg's Corn Flakes. That's how you can eat sunshine every day...

And this ad will remind you of someone (see above):

Only two Alka-Seltzers ago

You were feeling downhearted and low.

Who would ever know you were
under the weather
Only two Alka-Seltzers ago?

The famous Heineken series of advertisements, in the early 1980s, show how rule-bending can become a truly creative process, extending over several years. The original ad read: 'Heineken refreshes the parts other beers cannot reach', and the picture showed some person or thing being revived after a drink of the beer. Later texts bent the rules further, and played on the word 'parts'. One ad said: 'Heineken refreshes the parrots other beers cannot reach', showing a picture of a sea-dog's parrot being revived. Another replaced 'parts' by 'pilots', showing an airliner scene. Another used 'pirates'. Imagine arriving in London and seeing the ad 'Heineken refreshes the pirates other beers cannot reach'? Inexplicable, unless you knew the original slogan.

Daily newspapers break the rules, too, especially in their search for memorable or eye-catching headlines. The most famous example is *The Guardian*, which makes a point of extracting the maximum meaning out of the ambiguities of language, using puns, rhymes, and all kinds of linguistic allusions. A recent issue (17 June 1986) gives us, in an article on the lead-up to the Spanish elections: 'The reign in Spain which dampens the electorate' (remember *My Fair Lady*? 'The rain in Spain falls mainly on the plain?'). And, in what must be one of the worst puns on record, the same issue reports on a television programme about treasure-searching for opals in Australia, with the headline: 'When all seems opal-less!' (Get it? (1))

Down to earth

With TV and the press we are now, very definitely, down to earth. Listen to any TV comedy programme, and you'll find what is probably the most difficult linguistic genre of all – the language of popular humour. And what is this largely based on? Linguistic rule-bending – incongruity, unexpected juxtapositions of words, puns, loaded meanings, and the like. A sketch about the British government at the time of a recent crisis, when one minister had resigned and another was likely to, included the line (spoken by Mrs Thatcher): 'I told you that two Ministers ago'. It's that rule again.

Literature, theology, advertising, professional comedy... But actually, the most creative domain of linguistic rule-bending is the amateur world of – everyday informal conversations. I was listening to a group of students talking in a pub a short time ago. The most noticeable feature of their dialogue was the way they would play with each other's language, 'being clever', for fun. 'T'ank you', said one, adopting a mock Irish accent, as someone brought him a drink. 'No tanks here', said someone else, making a military allusion which made them all groan. Then, 'Time to make tracks', said a third, and they all collapsed into helpless giggling (2). (They had been in the pub for some time, it seems.) I've heard similar repartee from people of all ages and all walks of life. Children begin experimenting with the processes involved as early as eight, torturing parents with their awful jokes.

Child: Knock, knock.

Parent: Who's there?

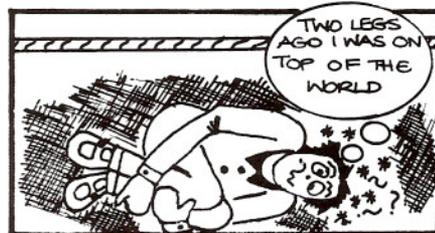
Child: Ken.

Parent: Ken who?

Child: Ken't (= can't) tell you!

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People love to walk on tiptoe along the edges of language, without falling off. A true sign of foreign language fluency is to be able to do likewise.



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Notes

* Slang used to refer to different racial groups. Often used as terms of abuse.

(1) 'Hopeless', of course.

(2) 'Make tracks' – 'leave'; but also, tracks can refer to the continuous belt enclosing the wheels of a tank.